

FRONTIER EDITION

by Susan S. Novak

Of the many goods and personal belongings that were packed in ox-drawn wagons to make the long trek across the newly opened plains in the mid-1800s, arguably the most important were the large, bulky, and enormously heavy cast-iron printing presses. They, with their endless boxes of alphabet letters, would print the many lines of news and opinion needed to shape the new frontier. Everywhere a new town sprang up (and sometimes well before the town took shape), at least one and often more local daily and weekly publications began rolling off the hand-cranked presses.

Looking back at these newspapers today, we find an unfamiliar design and language. Most early papers consisted of only a sheet or two, and many small-town publishers purchased “ready prints,” or newspaper stock, sold by syndication services, that were pre-printed on half the pages with selected national news; the

other half was left blank, where each town’s local stories were printed. Graphics were absent except for a few block-cuts. News items were interspersed randomly with ads, short stories, or poems, the authors of which wrote either in a flowery, ornate language designed to tug at the emotions, or in brash, rude diatribes filled with unseemly epithets. Advertisements had virtually no design, and the same bland ad could run for a year or more without changing.

Nevertheless, the newspaper’s contents were crucial to the development of each town, and overall to the development of our territory and state. In fact, newspapers are so closely tied to our state’s past, it has been said that “to write the history of the press is to write Kansas history.” Aside from serving as an important historical record, newspapers served vital functions in forming our state’s political, economic, and cultural presence.

The local newspaper
has always had
the power to
inform, enlighten,
persuade, and
entertain. Since its
first issue hot off
the press, it has
held sway over the
citizens of the state.



POLITICS

One of the primary forces motivating editors to establish newspapers was politics. Because in the mid- to late-1800s they were just about the only means of distributing news, such publications were considered critical to a political party's welfare. Especially at election time, editors hoped that well-placed propaganda would swing the popular vote one way or the other. This use of the medium in Kansas's past was apparent from the time the territory was established in 1854. In the eager rush by both sides of the slavery issue to fill the land with settlers who would vote the "proper" way, both proponents of slavery and members of free-state groups took to publishing newspapers, thereby circulating their ideas and calling like-minded thinkers to their respective causes.

The proslavery *Kansas Weekly Herald*, the first English-language newspaper published in

Kansas, began rolling off the presses on September 15, 1854, literally from under an elm tree at the new townsite of Leavenworth. Within no time the publication began to spew a violent proslavery bias. But this coarse rhetoric against freestaters was common in the press. In its August 16, 1855, issue, speaking of the abolitionists, the Atchison *Squatter Sovereign* referred to their "dastardly and infamous propensity for negro stealing" and suggested that they provide "every jail-bird in the north a necklace twelve feet in length."

Historians have said that editors' favorite expression was "independence in all things, neutrality in nothing," and proslavery papers found worthy adversaries in their free-state counterparts.

Home of the Atchison Daily Champion, about 1875, a newspaper founded in 1855 as a radical proslavery paper. Known then as the *Squatter Sovereign*, it changed to free-state hands two years later.



The Lawrence *Kansas Tribune* of September 15, 1855, spoke out just as boldly against the proslavery "bogus" legislature as "a disgrace to manhood, and a burlesque upon popular Republican Government!"

As insults and accusations among the increasing numbers of rival publications around the territory grew more heated, more than one printing press ended up in the nearby river as victims of the opposition.

When it came to expressing their political opinions, editors commonly spoke without reservation, and sometimes without logic. Legal issues, women's rights, and political movements all provided bountiful fodder for opinionated wordsmiths to chew on. The September 14, 1867, Manhattan *Kansas Radical* had plenty to say after Susan B. Anthony had spoken in town advocating woman suffrage:

Susan B. put the question to the ladies of the audience, and quite a number said "I," when asked if they wanted to vote. But because fifty women can be talked into marrying one man in Salt Lake, it does not prove that polygamy is right. The natural impulse of every woman is against voting as it is against polygamy.

Not to be outdone by the editors, it was not uncommon for advertisers to make their political opinions known in their ads, as in this one by C. Stearns from the Lawrence *Herald of Freedom*, July 11, 1857: "Bread! Bread! There are only two places in town where bread can be bought without encouraging the sale of Alcoholic drinks. One of them is at my Grocery Store, opposite the P.O.; and the other is my next door neighbors. Patronize the Temperance Bakeries."

Because political opinions of the time were voiced so

openly, frontier editors knew that physical violence against them was a very real possibility. Occasionally, editors lost their lives in quarrels begun with bitter and insulting rhetoric on the pages of their newspapers. The *Marion County Record* reported on one such incident in January 5, 1876: “[William] Embry, who shot [Daniel R.] Anthony, editor of the Leavenworth Times, has been acquitted. That’s just the way with some juries—they think it no more harm to shoot an editor than a Jack-rabbit.”

Newspapers and towns on the frontier lived an existence of mutual assistance. A new town could not survive without a newspaper to advertise it, but similarly a newspaper could not survive unless its town grew and prospered. Editors, therefore, became town boosters and took each opportunity to promote the fine qualities of their respective regions. The *Attwood Pioneer* of October 23, 1879, for example, tells its readers, “Of all the far-famed beautiful streams and prairies of Kansas, we have found those of Rawlins county equal to any, and, in some respects, superior to many parts of the State.”

In an attempt to help their communities thrive, editors often practiced their own version of product placement by slipping advertisements into the text columns. For example,



Inside the office of the *Cheney Sentinel*, about 1900. Owner and editor Jim Curry (left) poses with his family and assistant editor Jerome Miller (center).

ECONOMICS

surrounded by news items of some importance, the following appeared in the September 10, 1857, *Kansas Chief*: “Persons trading at Iowa Point, will please not forget the Pioneer Store of W. D. Beeler & Co., near the landing. Theirs was the first store, we believe, in Doniphan County, and the early settlers are greatly indebted to them for favors, through good times and bad, and should not forget them.”

For those editors trying to run an honest newspaper, times often were difficult. Even in growing towns newspapers seldom succeeded financially. To remain solvent, and sometimes just to obtain hard-to-find supplies, editors occasionally placed ads such as the following from the September 18, 1869, *Osage Chronicle*: “All those who wish to pay their subscriptions in wood will bring the same along immediately.”

Unfortunately in the process of town boosting, less than scrupulous speculators, aware that easterners knew little about the land west of Missouri, had a heyday by platting a site and designing lithographs of the new “town” as it *might* be, someday. They published these fantasy images along with far-fetched descriptions of their vacant land tracts and sent the finished product to eastern subscribers. Gullible souls collectively spent thousands of dollars only to arrive in their new paradises to find nothing but endless flat land with no town, no buildings, and usually no

productive plots of ground. Honest editors sometimes printed warnings of phony deals, as did Emporia's *Kansas News*, which warned readers of the corruption in Minneola, saying, "Be not deceived! It is a speculating swindle!"

Some historians have viewed the frontier newspaper as a vehicle of social change and improvement. One historian has pointed out that "Just as the six gun, the windmill, and barbed wire were regarded as the principal tools in the conquest of the Great Plains, so the frontier



Every town had one, no matter how primitive. The newspaper office of the Kingman Mercury is photographed here in 1880.

newspaper may be regarded as another important instrument in [the white man's view of] civilizing the West." The development of churches and schools were viewed as signs of a town's culture, but so too was the development of its newspaper, which offered hope and encouragement to new settlers. Many editors tried to improve their town's culture by writing well, offering samples of creative fiction and poetry, and advertising and supporting local cultural events.

Sometimes the editor grew stern in his views of cultured behaviors. The *Leavenworth Daily Times* of October 26, 1859, observed, "The celebrated, or rather notorious Lola Montez (now Mrs. Held) returned recently from Europe to this country. She has become a professor of christianity and 'repented' of her transgressions. About time."

Fortunately the folksy writing style of these early papers provides a colorful view of life 150 years ago, since local culture and custom often were reported as current events. A resident's trip to another town,

CULTURE

the arrival of someone's relative, a gathering in honor of a birthday or special occasion—all of these qualified as news. The *Kansas Chief* of September 10, 1857, provided an informative piece about a traditional shivaree:

FIRST WEDDING IN WHITE CLOUD.—

The first "hochzeit," as the Dutch would say, came off last Sunday, and was a rich affair. . . . In the night, a crowd proceeded to the house where they [the newlyweds] were roosting, after they had stowed themselves away for the night. They entered the house, seized the bride-groom, and dragged him out, amid the firing of guns and yelling of the crowd. They were taking him, *en chemise*, to a creek near by, to duck him, but were bought off, by the promise of a treat in the morning.

Matrimony is no small undertaking, in White Cloud!

In addition to reporting aspects of white frontier customs, newspapers also recorded and disseminated culture when they served such special interest groups as the military, freed slaves, or immigrants.

With the onslaught of foreign settlement in Kansas, immigrant publications often printed in native languages, provided news from the old country, helped preserve the groups' cultural identities, and promoted common interests among people of a shared heritage.

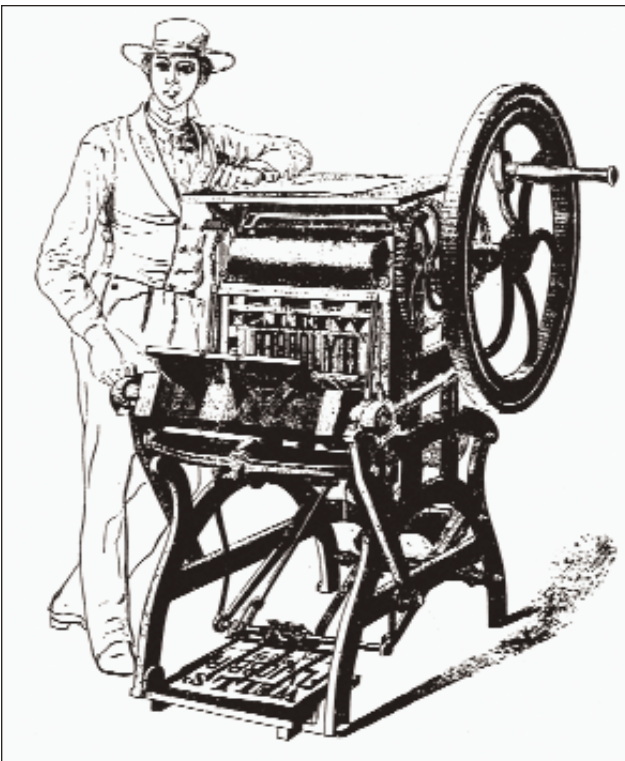
While scanning through the editors' columns of days past, readers today might find much of the early language extreme and insensitive, certainly inappropriate by today's standards. Until about 1890, with the rise of "yellow journalism," editors showed little concern about slander or libel. This came in part because they championed the First Amendment's call for freedom of the press, but also because defamation laws were a "morass of contradictory doctrines." It was common to find slanderous jabs such as this one, from the November 21, 1875, *Kansas News*:

Mr. [Hugh M.] Moore's appearance is perfectly indescribable, and the style of his eloquence a cross between that of the stump orator and the sympathetic Methodist camp-meeting exhorter, and as his hair stood stiff in short twisted bristles over his head, and his face is of a ghastly and cadaverous hugh, his voice thin and cracked, and his gestures nervous and excitable, the tout ensemble was painfully funny.

Neither did early Kansas reporters seem to struggle in presenting topics that might today be con-

sidered sensitive, particularly since these subjects were such a common part of everyday frontier life. Early journalists commonly went straight to the point and offered all the vivid details, as is evident in this 1860 *Oskaloosa Independent* article about a body discovered near town:

Every appearance of the body indicated that it had been lying there, unmolested, except by wolves or buzzards, for several days previous to its discovery. The body . . . being frightfully mutilated and decayed—



PRESENTATION

was identified as being that of William Toppan. . . . When found . . . a gallon jug, half full of whisky, sat by his side, the cork so loosely inserted as to create the opinion that he had taken his last drink of the fatal poison when so nearly exhausted, and so near the gates of death, that he could not return it tightly to its place.

The verdict of the jury was that "the deceased, William Toppan, came to his death by intemperance."

While this article might seem indelicate by today's standards, it was considered good journalism in its day. Such earthy reporting did not exceed the bounds of good taste, particularly for those members of the reading audience hardened by the sometimes unforgiving plains.

Format and writing styles aside, journalism today in many ways is not significantly different from that of 150 years ago. Although many other forms of communication have sprung up since the nineteenth century, our newspapers continue to take political stands, to inform and record and assist, to delight and aggravate, and serve to build and maintain community. The very public life of the person whose veins run with ink has never been an easy one, and the December 25, 1858, *Grasshopper*



The Garnett Review
pressroom, late 1800s, em-
ployed several women.

Falls Jefferson Crescent acknowledged this by reprinting a note from Punch, which described the editor as "A public servant, and withal a servant of the devil. . . he is always expected to know the latest news . . . must please everybody . . . must trust everybody, and is thought a great bore if he presents his bill! must be a ladder for all political aspirants to step into office . . . and finally summing it up, he is expected to be a man without a model and with[o]ut a shadow."

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